

Intensive Revision Stage as Stimulus for Achieving Successful Writing in ELT Contexts

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Abstract

The field of education succeeds because many ideas are written down for reference. The written works are realised thanks to the act of writing. A variety of approaches that are adapted by leaders put in place to meet up with educational demands and successes are achieved through the act of writing. Since such contributions and innovations in education are achieved mostly through writing, there is some need to look for possible ways to improve on writing in the English Language Teaching contexts. One of such ways is taking advantage of the intensive revision stage of writing as the basis for successful writing. In order for any written proposals to be understood and adopted, they ought to be written in a precise and concise manner. This shows that writing is a productive skill and therefore needs close attention at every point in time. No doubt, a majority of the students I have taught have admitted the fact that writing is the most difficult skill comparatively to other language skills such as listening, speaking and reading. This article suggests a possible way of achieving successful writing at the basic, secondary and tertiary levels.

Keywords: Successful Writing, ELT Contexts, Language Skills, Intensive Revision Stage

Introduction

Writing in the context of English language Teaching is a skill that has to be acquired through constant practice. Academic literacy is developmental with trajectories of increased sophistication in language use from one level to another. Given this complexity, it is not surprising that the concept of academic writing has been characterized as an evolving one by some researchers who tend to have various thoughts of what it is, and how it should be instantiated in language. When one revisits the importance of writing which can be used to share information, tell stories, create imagined worlds, combat loneliness, explore who we are, chronicle our experiences and expose research experiences, one thinks of the varied ways to develop and improve on it. In this article, one of such proposals is using the intensive revision stage as a kind of stimulus to achieve successful writing in the ELT contexts.

Area of Writing

The area of writing considered in this paper is the academic writing fields. The end product of writing is considered as a written text. Every academic text is produced to serve particular purpose (s). An academic text may be informative, instructive, inquisitive, expressive or expository in a formal or informal setting. Whatever be the text type, there is need for the writer to transmit the information in an acceptable manner. Therefore, it is necessary from the beginning to intuitively place the academic text in its context where the internal structure and communication of the text are determined by the knowledge of the world. In this light, the knowledge on the conventions, procedures, strategies and the goals of the discourse community from which the text type originates will determine the success of such a text.

A written academic text is a syntactically and semantically well-organized sequence of words of any length. A written text creates openings for text analysis which according to Jaworski and Coupland (1999: 5) studies the way ‘one communicative act or text depends on previous acts or texts’. The important thing for the reader is to know exactly the adequate kind and size of corpus needed for each study. In order to get this, Bhatia (1993:23) proposes that one needs to first “define the genre/sub-genre that one is working with well enough so that it may be distinguishable from other genres either similar or closely related in some ways”. This is necessary because if the definition is not clear enough, one may be mixed up in comprehension and selection. For any text to be understood and selected for a study, it must have been

written in a successful manner. The interest here is to bring out one of those ways that lead to a comprehensive text.

Academic Writing Specificity

Academic writing is clearly far from being a clear-cut concept, but this in no way implies that it is vague writing. A well-written academic text may easily be distinguished from an oral transcript, for example. Indeed, writing in the academia goes further than polishing style and observing basic syntactic rules. It involves not only presenting clear claims, reasons, and evidence, but doing so in the context of arguments that might have been made in reply.

Furthermore, academic writing is also disciplinary specific. Linguists do not write like microbiologists and aviation texts are rhetorically different from historical texts, although they all obey basic rules of clarity, logic and grammaticality. These basic features have been considered the most essential by many writers concerned with academic writing who have argued against subject-specific teaching of academic English.

Nevertheless, the specificity of academic writing is self-evident to the extent that academic disciplines are different and have different conventions. The whole idea of “specificity” was central to the original conception of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), when it was characterized as centred on the language, and activities appropriate to particular disciplines and occupations.

Focus on Content

The content of what is written in any text always orientates academic writing. The impetus for considering academic writing as disciplinary-specific has come from educators and researchers in the disciplines, who have realized the critical role language plays in acquiring content knowledge and writing about that content. In attempting therefore to identify those lexico-grammatical and discoursal functions that should constitute the centre piece of writing, research on English for Academic Purpose has tended to focus on a “thicker” description of language use in academia (Hyland & Tse 2004). This article suggests what can be done to achieve writing that is ‘good’, which goes further away from language description. Within the specific discipline of social sciences, especially general and applied linguistics, features such as modality (Nkemeleke 2008a), recurrent multi-word expressions have been identified as markers of proficient language use in academic writing. What remains problematic is the rail way to such a product.

Achieving successful writing at the higher education could best work if focus of the content is on problem-based, project-based and competency-based related approaches. The problem-based approach gets students to learn to write through the experience of solving open-ended problems by writing using the trigger material. The carefully designed problems challenge students to use problem solving techniques and self-directed strategies to write. Project-based entails students’ writing which involves a dynamic use of the deeper knowledge they acquire through active exploration of real –world challenges and problems. The students’ use of competency-based to improve on how to write will lead them to develop concrete sub skills in writing especially as they are given the allowance to be creative and this can lead to effective writing as well.

Focus on Organizational Structures

There is a particular way any writing is organized. To understand and explore ways in which any category of written text is structured is important. Some of these ways include: paragraphing, text length and text methodology. These three are generally employed in the writing process consciously. Paragraphing is visible on the students’ writing skills and serves as a guide to the reader, and as input to the written work. It is important to note that this macrostructure of writing pushes students to make ample efforts to employ

guidelines needed to facilitate the understanding of every point developed in the paragraph. The length of the text and the method used to write depends on the context and the text type that is written.

Furthermore, students have to determine the choice of appropriate macrostructures to render the organization of the paragraphs most presentable for the readers. This guides the students to select their writing method appropriately. Frederiksen & Dominic (1989) hold that the most inherent characteristics of every method is selection. Each method of writing must be selected accordingly. The students' encounter with difficulties in selecting the acceptable method of writing can be deduced from the difficulties they often face in organizing good paragraphs. Students' motives and methods for selection are conditioned by the fact that their efforts in writing should end up with good written texts. This is conditioned by the fact that what the students write will be read by readers and as they fear criticisms, they become conscious of what they are writing. This consciousness is can be intensified at the level of editing, which is the revision stage.

For students at any level to write well, they have to first of all make personal efforts and follow the way any given writing should be presented. Though it is difficult to expect perfection from students, it is important for them to demonstrate their possession of the knowledge that they are conscious of how they should write successfully.

Achieving Success in Writing

This section proposes ways through which wordiness in any form of writing can be avoided to achieve conciseness. From the lengthy and wordy texts students write, there is need for them to adopt ways of writing in such a way that they can achieve conciseness. To achieve it, the students have to write carefully and redraft several times. Constant practice can help the students develop this skill. There are several factors which contribute to a concise style.

The most important skill is the ability to omit irrelevant or peripheral material. Also, the fact that students write lengthily suggests that conciseness is a skill which students need to develop so that they can start the application at the level of sentence and paragraph construction. If they are conscious that they have to do so, they will become very good at finding words or phrases which convey a great deal of information.

Knowledge about an Intensive Revision Stage

The knowledge about the role of an intensive revision stage can play in the writing of academic texts is important. Revision is an important thing to do because students should not be expected to end up with a well-formed write up on a first draft. The writing process in itself starts with a prewriting stage, followed by a drafting stage which can end up with three or more drafts. In fact, the students require more than three drafts to achieve their best in their written texts. When the first draft of the text is finished, it is ready for revision which is considered here as the intensive revision stage. It is referred to as intensive because ample care has to be taken at this point because editing will give birth to the final product. In that regard, to revise is to re-read the draft to see what works and what does not work, reason one thinks an intensive revision stage is recommended. During the evaluation process, it is advisable to analyse what is to be changed or improved in the write up. When this is done, the student can proceed and make the changes required.

One of the changes to be made may be to solve the problem of wordiness. After writing the first draft, students should look at it to edit, but more particularly to see where unnecessary, words, sentences and even paragraphs can be pruned back. This can be done by removing the sentences which contain little or no useful information, deleting repetitious parts, and getting rid of unnecessary phrases such as *kind of*, *sort of*, *type of*, *in addition to*, *the nature of*, *an investigation into*. It will be helpful for students to go over every word. If it has no purpose, it should be scrubbed off. This suggests that preference should, however

be given to short sentences because complex sentences may hinder understanding and make the write up to look clumsy. If this is done, the students will be on the right tract to achieving success in writing.

In the same light, revision means revising and re-seeing whether there can be improvement on the form, word choice, sentence variety and organization of the content. The revision stage can be considered to an extent to have a starting point and an ending point on its own though it is part of a whole process of writing. This means that the starting point is when a text has been written or re-written. At this point, there is a proposed template which can be used to revise the text that has been written to stimulate the achievement of successful writing. We think that it is a cycle that must be completed. In the figure below, there is a demonstration of a clockwise revision cycle which is designed to be followed by students to render their writing better.

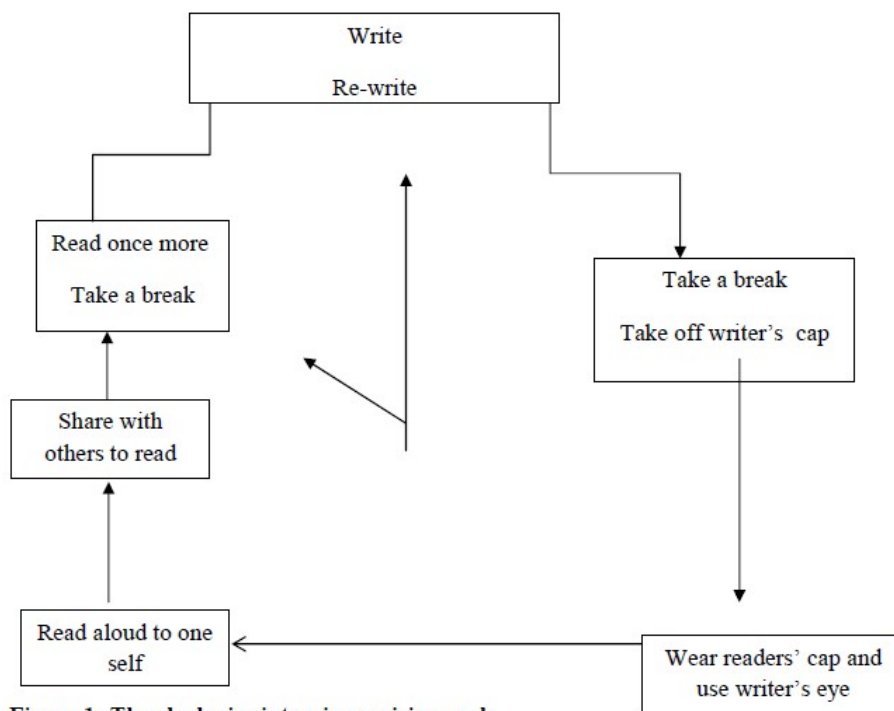


Figure 1: The clockwise intensive revision cycle

From the chart above, demonstrating the clockwise revision cycle, there are six phases where the starting point is at “write” and thereafter, “take a break”. After the draft, it is advisable to stay away from the text that has been written for some time. At this point, a glass of water could be taken, a short walk could do or simply, a cool and slow music could be listened to. As the work area is distanced, a look up to the sky, at the natural things around and a stretch out could be quite refreshing. A day or more might even be proper to stay away from the written text so that it will be better assessed in terms of the strengths and weaknesses.

The next step “take off writers’ cap” is the immediate stage that follows the one discussed above. At this point, the student may pretend as if the text to be read is someone else’s. This way, it will be possible to see how it looks to another person. By so doing, the writer’s cap is taken off and some objective reading is about to take place.

In addition, “wear reader’s cap and use writer’s eye” is another phase that could be helpful. At this point in time, reading is done as if that piece was never seen before. Ideas that might be confusing are looked for and at the same time considering the questions that the reader might ask. In the course of doing this,

some items that need adjustment may be identified. The need to remove writer's cap is equally as important as reading with the writer's eye. This will pave a way to understanding how expert writers write because the finished write-up is to be read by other people. This entails reading with curiosity to see what makes it work by turning the next inside-out for objective evaluation.

To proceed, the written text should be "read aloud to oneself". It could re-echo the flow of words though it may feel strange to read aloud to oneself. It might end up being an effective technique because reading aloud gives an opportunity to find errors and to hear where improvement on what is written could be done. At this point, it is possible to improve on the abstract by smoothing out transitions between content items. Still, if it is more comfortable reading out the draft to someone else aloud, it is good and this will make a positive difference as well.

Sharing the first draft of the write-up to other people to read could be helpful. That is why there is the portion "share with others to read" included in the cycle above. Others could be friends or family members, what is important are their reactions towards the draft. Find out from them whether the ideas are clearly stated. Encourage them to feel free to indicate which sections are informative and why. In the same way, try to find out if there are questions on the way ideas are expressed and decide what would make it better.

A clockwise revision template might be just what is needed to sort out the weaknesses in the text written. The core part of the template could be rated on a scale. If they are insufficient, ideas about the kinds of things to improve on may surface. The template invites peer review and suggestions. Peer review in this setting involves revision with a small group; which is more likely to help each other analyse their written texts and make thoughtful changes. The use of the clockwise revision cycle template may result to objective improvements. Reviewing written drafts of any given text as a group needs a neutral person (coach) if a supervisor is not available. The names of those who have written the texts are covered so that the group will review to keep the work anonymous while everyone is served with a copy. Suggesting on how reviewing drafts as a group can proceed, Jeff & Gallagher (2012) insist that respect must be shown for all group members and the writings meanwhile note should be taken that all critiques should include positive comments and presented in a positive, helpful way without being subjective.

The tasks during revision could be demanding, each would require students to try and try again to achieve real proficiency. One way of stimulating and supporting successful outcomes in writing acceptable texts is by getting students prior to writing them to make students privy to audience reactions to their works. In this way, they will always be conscious whether what they are writing is too imitative or not. Also, the students will be able to differentiate whether the ideas in the texts written are logical from one to another with careful transitions, or whether it is too extensive or too brief to serve the purpose of the text type. The easiest way is to identify problems related to the texts and to respond to them with improved drafts when someone reads and reacts to them honestly and thoughtfully. This cannot be done successfully if students do not put efforts over time to accomplish the task of writing accordingly. Such efforts fight challenges and frustration that may be involved in the writing task as a whole.

Fighting challenges and frustration requires motivation which should greatly come from the students and partly from those who read the written text. There is great need to encourage students of the benefits to write successfully. In the same way, they should keep students actively engaged, exposing and explaining the importance of each activity and revealing to the students the value that active engagement can have on the text. There is great support on the part of the peer readers and self-awareness and determination on the part of the students. This will make the students to acknowledge how less difficult the task of writing of any form could be if only they are actively engaged in writing activities. This is because practice is very necessary to develop the skill and dispositions of acceptable writing. The main suggested idea behind the

writing activities is the understanding of the fact that writing serves a communication function and plays an invaluable role in society.

We think that writing directly enhances students' learning as well as their ability to read effectively. This can lead to the development of 'direct, indirect and authentic writing tasks' so that if any writing assessment approaches, that can partly rescue students from the complex nature of writing in general. Through writing, many mechanisms for maintaining personal links with other people are provided and it is also an extremely versatile tool that is used to accomplish a variety of goals (Graham, 2006a). In as much as writing is used to share information, tell stories, create imagined worlds, combat loneliness, explore who we are, chronicle our experiences and expose research experiences, one of the best ways to maintain its importance is to develop varied ways of improving it. One of such proposals is taking advantage of the intensive revision stage as a kind of stimulus to achieve successful writing in ELT contexts.

The proposal on improving on writing in this section is practical and can lead the writer to get a job, make proposals, and keep up with activities of different types. Given that writing is thinking and communication, encouraging the culture in students of all levels in general and can specifically push post graduate students to solve future societal problems at large. They can use words through writing to settle matters of law, negotiating an end to strikes, establishing relationships with some companies and other countries and even achieving a professional advancement. This is close to Britt's (1989) claim that studies have shown that people who write well and speak well have wider choices in the job market and greater chances for promotion and salary increase. This is the vision that could be good for students to capture so that they can be motivated to write well.

Conclusion

The general focus has been to present the relevance of an intensive revision stage to academic writing and to propose a template of revision known as the *clockwise intensive revision cycle* that can be used as a stimulus to achieving successful writing in English Language Teaching contexts. It is thought that with emphasis on the revision stage, effective writing can be realised by students of all levels. If this practice is constant, it can build a culture of skilful writers.

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